

SEAL THE DEAL: UN project seeks to protect West African coastline from erosion



Mangroves protect coastal areas against erosion, cyclones and wind

30 October 2009 – In West Africa, the coast is more than just a simple marker between land and sea. It's also the home of millions – as much as 80 per cent of the populations of many countries live nearby – and a vital source of livelihoods and income thanks to the critical industries of fishing and tourism.

Now the region's lifeline is under siege. Partly because of man-made climate change, West Africa's coastline is diminishing, as erosion eats away relentlessly at the land.

But a United Nations project in five countries (Cape Verde, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania and Senegal) is seeking to reverse this trend. The scheme, which is still in a pilot phase, having been rolled out only in Guinea-Bissau so far, aims to protect the region's biodiversity and to enhance the abilities of local communities to adapt to the erosion.

"From my own experience, I don't think people generally are aware of climate change per se," but they have witnessed changes in coastal areas, said Isabelle Niang, Regional Coordinator of the Adaptation to Climate Change in Coastal Zones of West Africa (**ACCC**) programme.

West Africa's coasts are home to a rich array of ecosystems, including mangroves, lagoons, wetlands and coral reefs. Many species of fish, crustaceans and turtles make their home here, also a key part of global migration routes for birds.

Mangrove restoration activities to encourage the return of birds and fish, as well as protection and restoration of beaches to allow turtles to find better conditions to nest, will be some of the activities within the scheme, which will be executed by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (**UNESCO**).

Aside from its impact on tourism, with several hotels already having been greatly affected, coastal erosion is also hurting maritime and river commerce; the extraction of mineral

resources; and agriculture. In the coming years, major urban centres could be inundated as well, with a shortage in drinking water looming.

Nations are hoping to 'seal the deal' on a new climate change agreement – intended to go into effect after the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol ends in 2012 – this December in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Along with emissions reductions targets by industrialized nations, helping developing countries adapt to global warming's effects is also a large component of the pact set to be reached in the Danish capital.

The multi-million dollar ACCC initiative hopes to promote multiple adaptation responses to the degradation.

Although the five pilot countries are all in the same region, the problems differ from nation to nation, Dr. Niang noted, adding that " we can't [assume] that we will have the same type of solutions for each country."

The scheme will be implemented by the UN Development Programme (**UNDP**) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF), a partnership among 178 countries, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector.

Also supported by the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), it will also try to ensure that development plans and policies at the regional and national level incorporate climate change considerations.

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